

## It's faltering here

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Does it ever happen that you sometimes find your head spinning when reading poetry or prose? That you are virtually slipping on the lines and feel like you are falling into a void? And after a while you even begin to feel delirious? If so, then it can be a good sign, for in delirium, according to Gilles Deleuze, literature drives words from one end of the universe to the other and achieves its ultimate goal: to unveil life's possibilities.

It is no minor task here that literature has to shoulder, and the question arises as to whether we are able to distinguish good literature from bad, that everything begins to falter when reading the good – like on a rickety ferryboat out on the rough seas. Forasmuch as we yearn for a safe harbor while suffering from nausea out on the ferry, faltering when reading would mean exactly the opposite: the more literature pulls the rug out from under us, the more we must steadfastly resist the urge to return to our comfort zone, snap the book shut and exclaim «What nonsense!»

Deleuze derives support from the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. He, too, had great confidence in literature when he declared poets to be the world's unacknowledged lawgivers, without whom a moral society is not possible. Unsung lawgivers, because as opposed to the poets, the philosophers took credit for society's moral progress, despite the fact that it was the poets' imagination creating the elements, while the philosophers then only needed to arrange them in proper order.

In this respect, the division of roles would be obvious: the poets take a deep breath and in the ensuing whirlwind as they exhale, the customary structure of words is beside itself. Once calmness is restored, the philosophers come into play, consider the tohubohu of the new and old, of the maimed and unscathed words, and piece together with fastidious reason what is usable for the future. Or given a romantic spin: life is but

a poem written by us. Poetic imagination creates its elements, and philosophical reason brings them together in such a manner that life turns out well for us.

If we adhere to this endearing notion, then we have to trust that not only will the philosophers' reason know the appropriate procedures for culling and assembling, but also that the poets' imagination will not create elements that leave philosophers, by any stretch of the imagination, at loose ends. A risky proposition! Searching for alternatives, keeping an eye out for a different kind of possible collaboration, can therefore be a survival strategy.

Language, the mutual medium of literature and philosophy, has always rocked the boat, leading from time to time to aloofness, every now and then to attempts at rapprochement. The term rapprochement should be discussed here, rapprochement which not only takes other disciplines such as the social and natural scientists on board, but also each and every one of us who uses language.

Poetry, maintained Shelly, lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world. And Deleuze, in taking up Beckett's proposal, notes that we would have to drill holes in language to see what lurks behind it. Both images come upon an intuition that has been widespread for millennia and systematically rehashed in philosophy, first of all by Plato: aside from the reality as we know it, there is a true reality, thus a reality behind the veil of phenomena and behind everyday language. Plato was confident that a select few would succeed in detecting this true reality and hence the truth. To be sure, he was not thinking of the poets – to the contrary, he took a dim view of them; nevertheless, they understood it hereinafter as their task. If words are simply given a good shaking, then the ineffable and, by extension, the truth behind the language will somehow become discernible – from then on, this aspiration always resonated in poetry.

But what if nothing is behind the veil or nothing is lurking in the holes? What if there were no true reality to discover because there is no true reality and we were simply left completely to our own devices? In that case, with one of us the impartial bearer of truth and its criterion, truth would be nothing absolute, but rather something created by us, or more

precisely, through our language. The truth of a sentence would no longer depend on whether it corresponded to facts and circumstances, to something in true reality.

If this were so, then philosophers would have no absolute criterion to gauge how the elements created by poets are to be assembled. And then what? Where do we find criteria for truth, for literature that contributes to an enrichment of life, which we regard as progress, as a gain in freedom?

A comparatively new trend in philosophy provides an answer. Pragmatism posits truth in social practice. Truth is what works. Or perhaps: truth arises from an idea, transpires from the poets' elements and the philosophers' attempts at order, happens to us when we try out new words and sentences. With this approach, it is assumed that imagination is the origin of language as well as a prerequisite for both language and awareness, both reasoning and cognizance. If imagination creates new words, then it recommends by extension new social practices which can render possible a more moral, happier life. Experience, trial and error will reveal whether the recommendations are the right ones. Truthful is what has been proven worthwhile, what furthers society, in its own estimation.

Accordingly, we have not only invented the wheel, sanitation, both the written and printed word as well as the computer, but also words like art, beauty, big data, danger, eroticism, freedom, gravity, kobold, logic, morality, nonsense, perplexity, positron, profit, proprietorship, speed of light, time and future. All of these words are put to the test in social coexistence – and as long as they stand the test and, thanks to their use, shift social practices and our lives in a direction that we value, they remain an integral part of our language.

If we acknowledge this confident concept of truth and progress, then poets and philosophers obtain the same roles. They are inventors of words, together with all the other phantasts in other areas of life. It may well be that poets have more experience in inventing, that philosophers have more experience in dissecting and culling, but it does not mean poets know better than anyone what imagination is and could therefore contend that what they invent always makes sense. Nor does it mean

that philosophers are the kings of reason who could recognize the reasonable, the real and the truth with greater precision and certainty than others. It is rather our day-to-day dealings with the products of our imagination and, in the process, demonstrating their aptitude to discover distinctions, find arguments, develop visions that turn them into reasonable, truthful words that henceforth enrich the language.

It is there, at the confluence of philosophy, literature and all other areas of language, where they are concertedly delirious, where they embrace the challenge and withstand the faltering, the uncertainty, the outspokenness, where they become a phenomenal practice that can contribute to a happy life.

Is it faltering here? How fortunate.

S.-V. Renninger: «Hier schwankt's». In: E. Czurda, F. Kretzen & S.-V. Renninger (2014): «Handbuch der Ratlosigkeit». Zürich: Limmat.  
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